



ANWAR AL-AWLAKI

PART III: ANWAR AL-AWLAKI ONLINE

AUGUST 2017



PART III: ANWAR AL-AWLAKI ONLINE CASE STUDY: ANWAR AL-AWLAKI ON YOUTUBE

Fast Facts: Anwar al-Awlaki on YouTube

- “Anwar al-Awlaki jihad” yielded 5,670 results as of August 30, 2017
- “Anwar al-Awlaki” yielded [61,900](#) search results as of December 18, 2015, and 70,100 results as of August 30, 2017

YouTube’s features – (1) search, (2) autofill, and (3) recommendations – guide viewers to extremist content by Awlaki and others. The first feature, **search**, readily exposes users to extremist content. The second feature, **autofill**, suggests related terms in YouTube’s search engine. The third feature, **recommendations**, suggests related video content.

Each of these features has served to lure users to extremist content on YouTube, despite CEP’s calls for YouTube to cease hosting Awlaki content. As CEP has documented, Awlaki is cited as an influence in [dozens](#) of U.S. and European extremist cases. Extremists have also reportedly been inspired to carry out attacks by watching other extremist preachers on YouTube, like U.S. extremist [Ahmad Musa Jibril](#). One of the assailants in the June 3, 2017, London Bridge attack was reportedly radicalized while watching Jibril’s videos on YouTube.¹

1) Search (search engine):

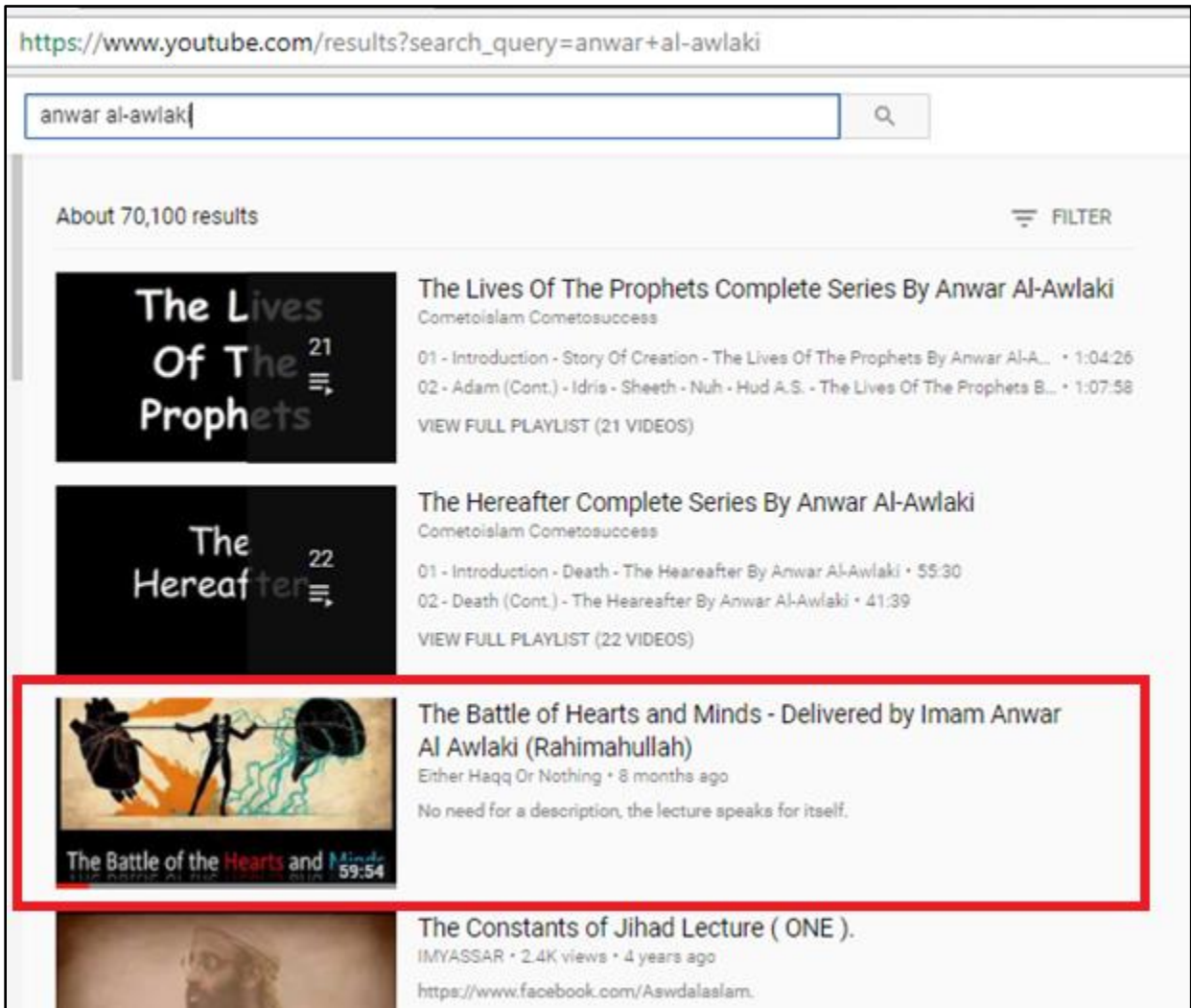
- a. A search for “Anwar al-Awlaki” on YouTube yields **70,100 results** as of August 30, 2017
- b. Awlaki’s extremist and rallying “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture is **the first video to appear** when conducting a search for Awlaki content. One copy of the lecture has been up on YouTube’s platform for **more than eight months**. A search for “Anwar

¹ Martin Evans, Nicola Harley, Harry Yorke, “London terrorist had twice been referred to police over his extremist views,” *Telegraph* (London), June 4, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/04/london-terrorist-had-twice-referred-police-extremist-views/>.

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al-Awlaki Battle of the Hearts and Minds” on YouTube yielded 991 results as of August 30, 2017, up from more than 220 results in September 2016.



A search for “Anwar al-Awlaki” on YouTube yields more than 70,000 search results (August 2017). The first video result is “Battle of the Hearts and Minds,” a rallying lecture by Awlaki that lionizes terrorists. This version of the lecture has been live on YouTube for more than eight months, garnering more than 15,000 views. Other copies of the lecture have been live on the platform for more than eight years.

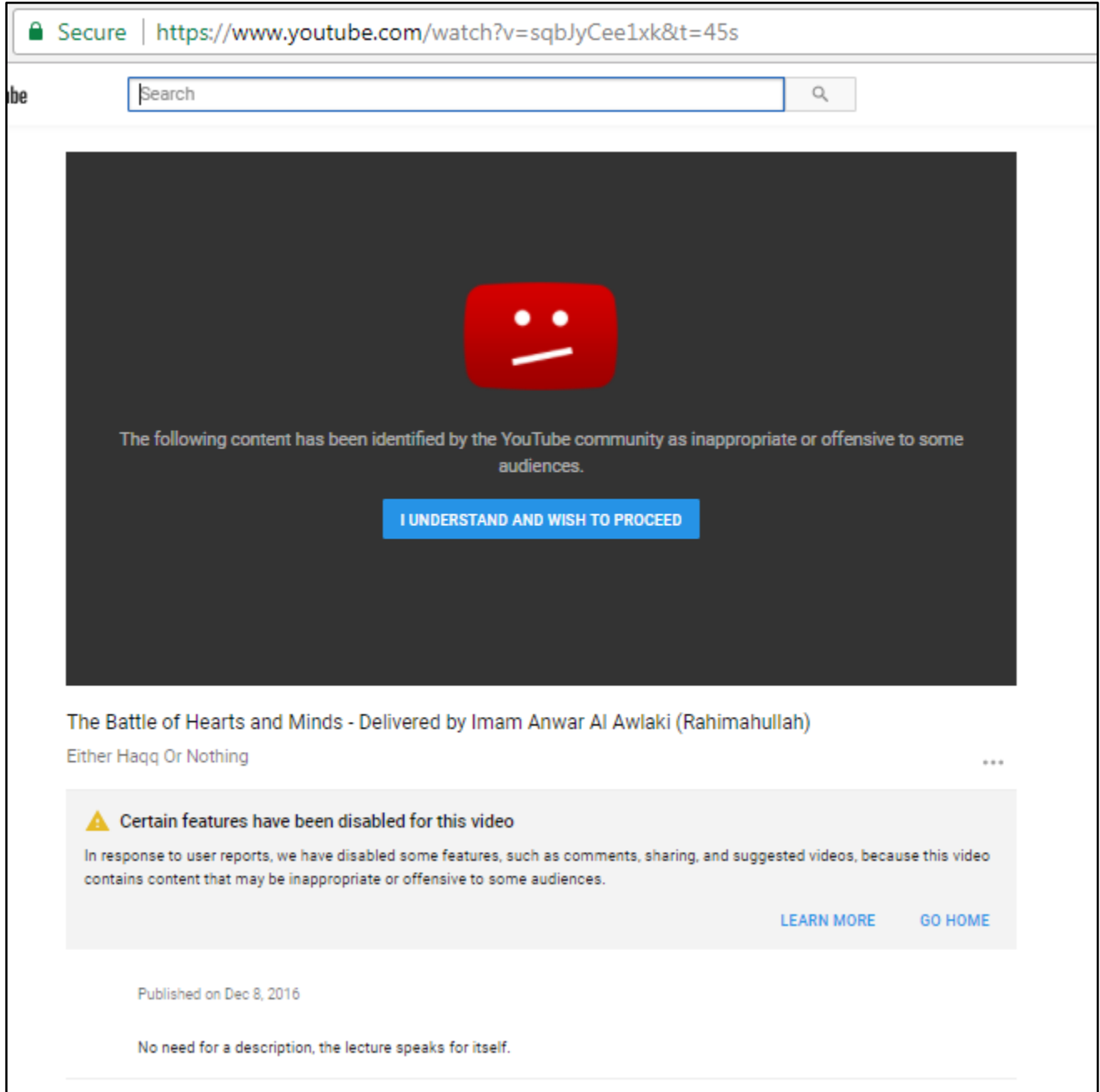
“Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture:

YouTube has taken a contradictory approach to Awlaki’s “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture, removing some versions of the lecture while allowing other versions to remain up. At some point between June and August of 2017, a warning label was placed before at least one copy of the lecture

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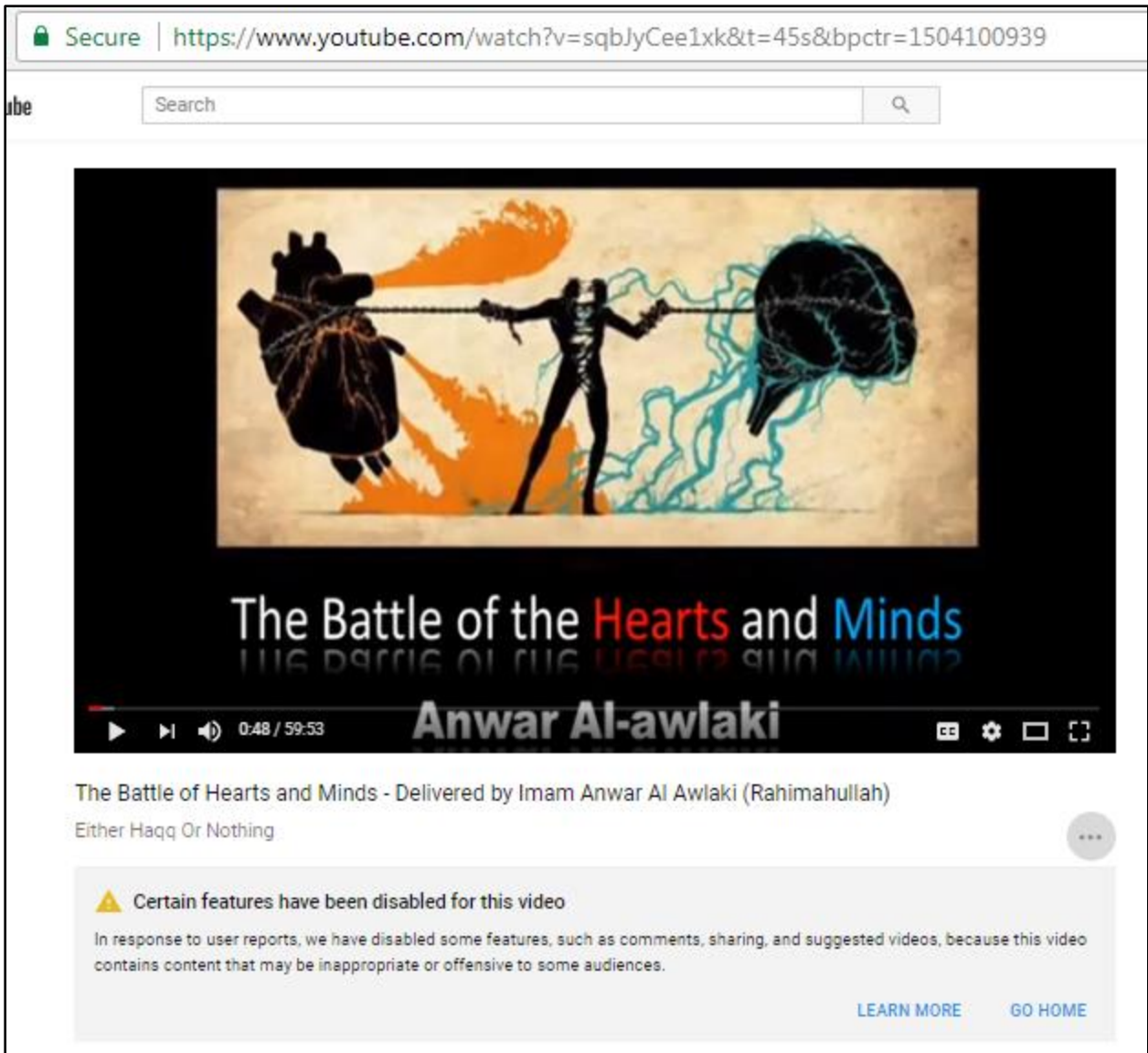
that was allowed to remain live on the platform, and interested viewers were directed to click “I understand and wish to proceed” if they wanted to access the content.



YouTube warning label appearing on one copy of Awlaki’s “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture (August 2017). YouTube informs viewers that the video “may be inappropriate or offensive to some audiences.” Viewers are nonetheless directed to click “I understand and wish to proceed.” In place of a comment section, YouTube’s platform shows “No need for a description, the lecture speaks for itself.”

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The screenshot shows a YouTube video player interface. The address bar at the top displays a secure connection to a YouTube watch page. The video player itself shows a still image of a figure holding a staff with a heart and a brain, with the title "The Battle of the Hearts and Minds" and the name "Anwar Al-awlaki" below it. Below the video player, the video title and uploader information are visible. A prominent warning box is overlaid on the page, stating that certain features are disabled for this video due to user reports.

Secure | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqbJyCee1xk&t=45s&bpctr=1504100939>

Search

The Battle of the Hearts and Minds

Anwar Al-awlaki

The Battle of Hearts and Minds - Delivered by Imam Anwar Al Awlaki (Rahimahullah)

Either Haqq Or Nothing

⚠️ Certain features have been disabled for this video

In response to user reports, we have disabled some features, such as comments, sharing, and suggested videos, because this video contains content that may be inappropriate or offensive to some audiences.

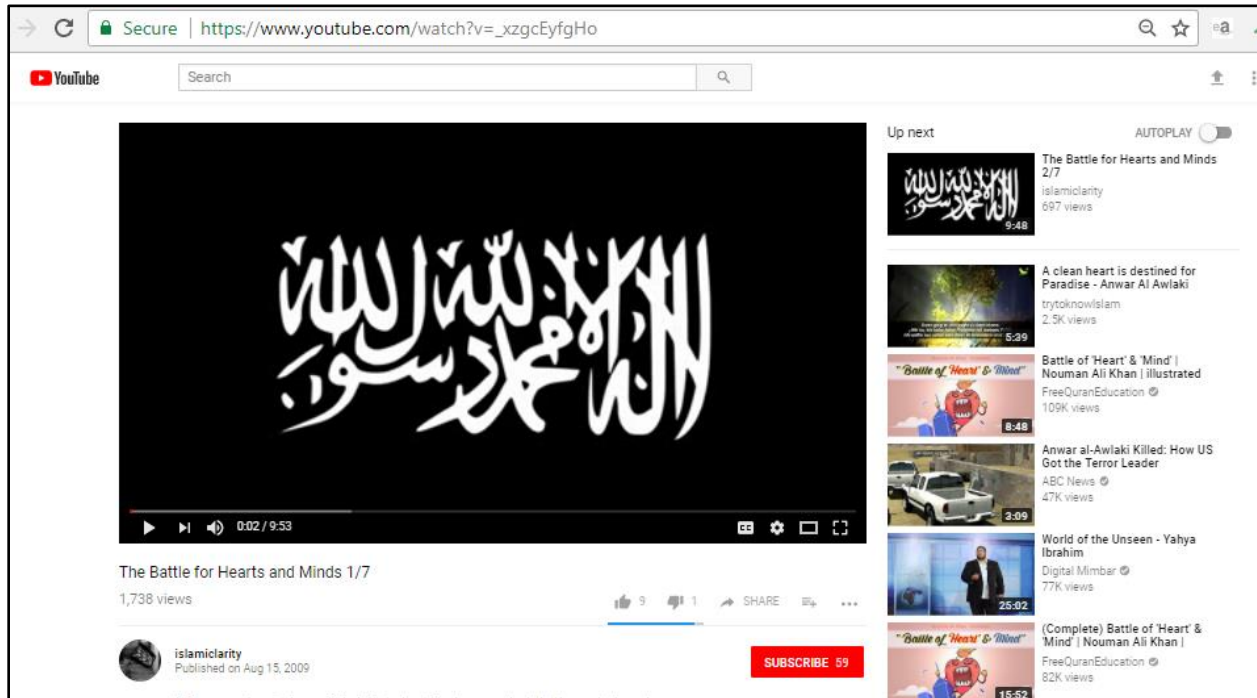
[LEARN MORE](#) [GO HOME](#)

Upon clicking “I understand and wish to proceed,” viewers are able to listen to nearly an hour of Awlaki’s content, from his infamous “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture.

Another copy of the “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture has been live on the site for **eight years**:

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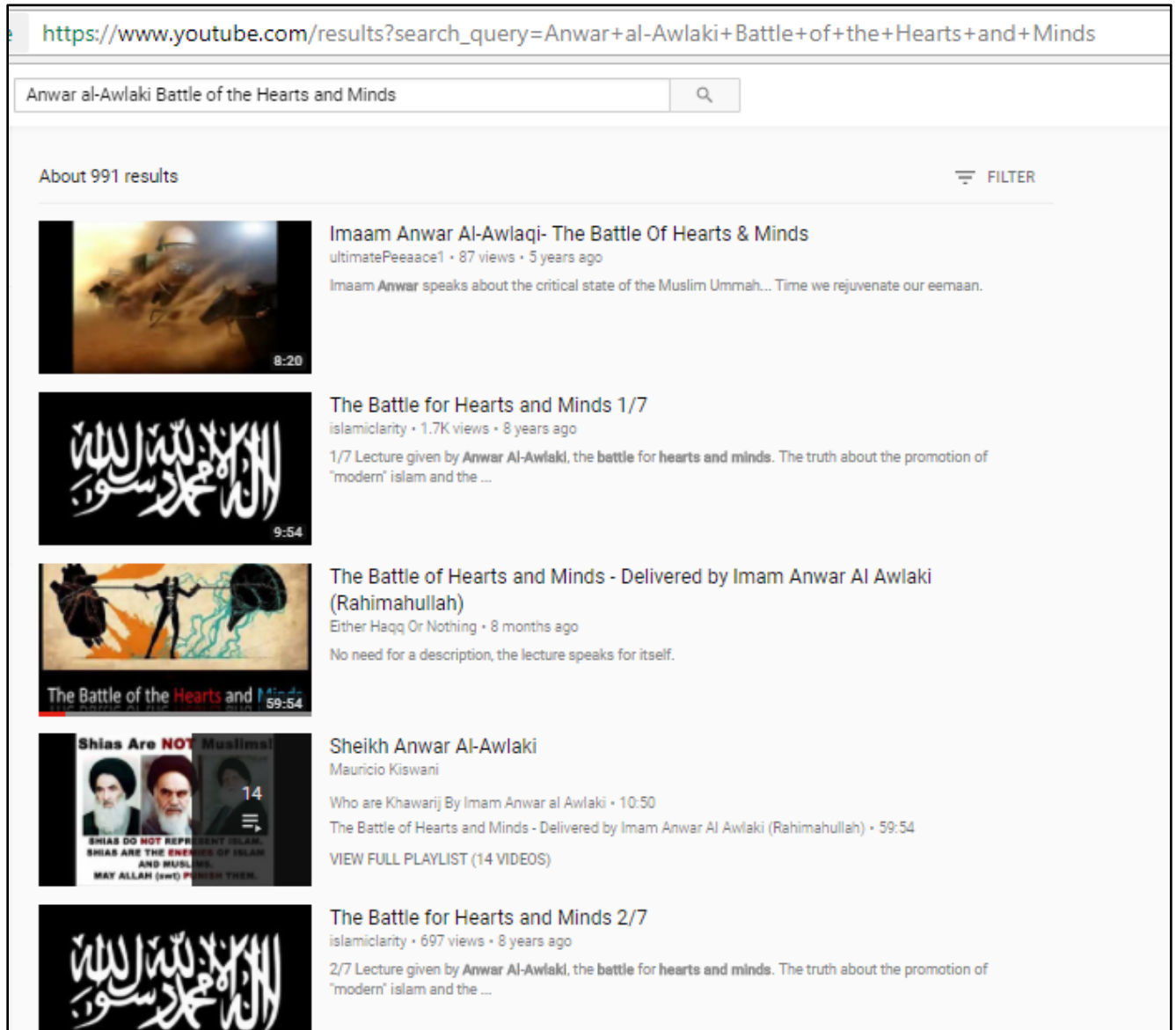
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*A version of Awlaki’s “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lecture, live on YouTube’s platform for **more than eight years**, since August 15, 2009. The video is easily accessible through a search for “Anwar al-Awlaki Battle of the Hearts and Minds.” On the right-hand side, YouTube’s “autoplay” feature (Up next) automatically queues viewers to watch the next portion of Awlaki’s Battle of the Hearts and Minds lecture. Below, YouTube’s related videos section encourages users to watch another video lecture by Anwar al-Awlaki. (August 2017)*

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*A search for Anwar al-Awlaki's Battle of the Hearts and Minds yields more than 900 search results.
(August 2017)*

Excerpt from the Battle of Hearts and Minds:

"Dear brothers and sisters we are not only victims, of U.S. military and political aggression, but we are also victims of U.S. lies! They have been lying about our brothers, charging them with false accusations, until they put hatred of them in our hearts, and they have planted the seeds of disunity amongst us! ... [we] are victims of this Western media and U.S. lies. We need to be aware! We need to be careful."

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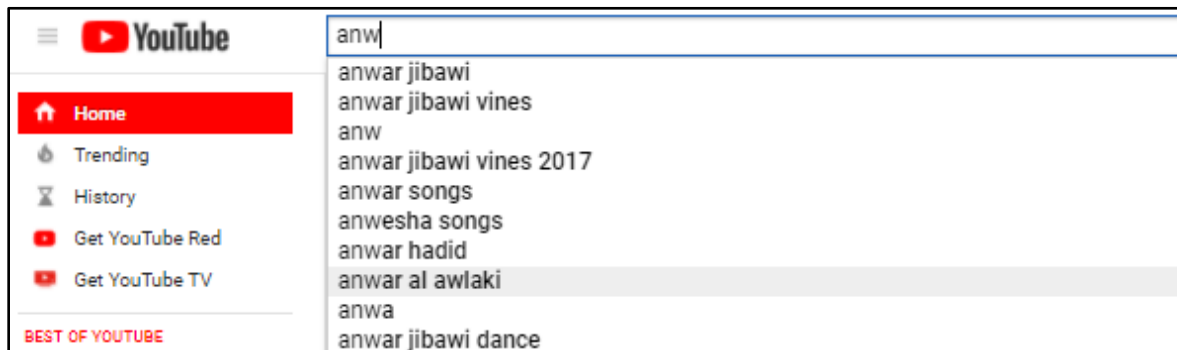
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“Miss Bernard and her cronies at Rand [Corporation] and [the] Pentagon should know that their plan would fail because Allah is the best of planners! And that the fundamentalists and extremists, whom they despise, are not only going to win in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they will continue their march, until they drag your people, the Jews, out of the Holy Land and plant their black banners on the roof tops of Jerusalem.”

“[W]hat I really fail to understand, is how can the martyr, the Shaheed, who willingly and happily, hands over his soul to Allah, who walks towards his faith, with pleasure, and faces death with a smile, what I fail to understand is how can you call such a person a ‘coward’!”

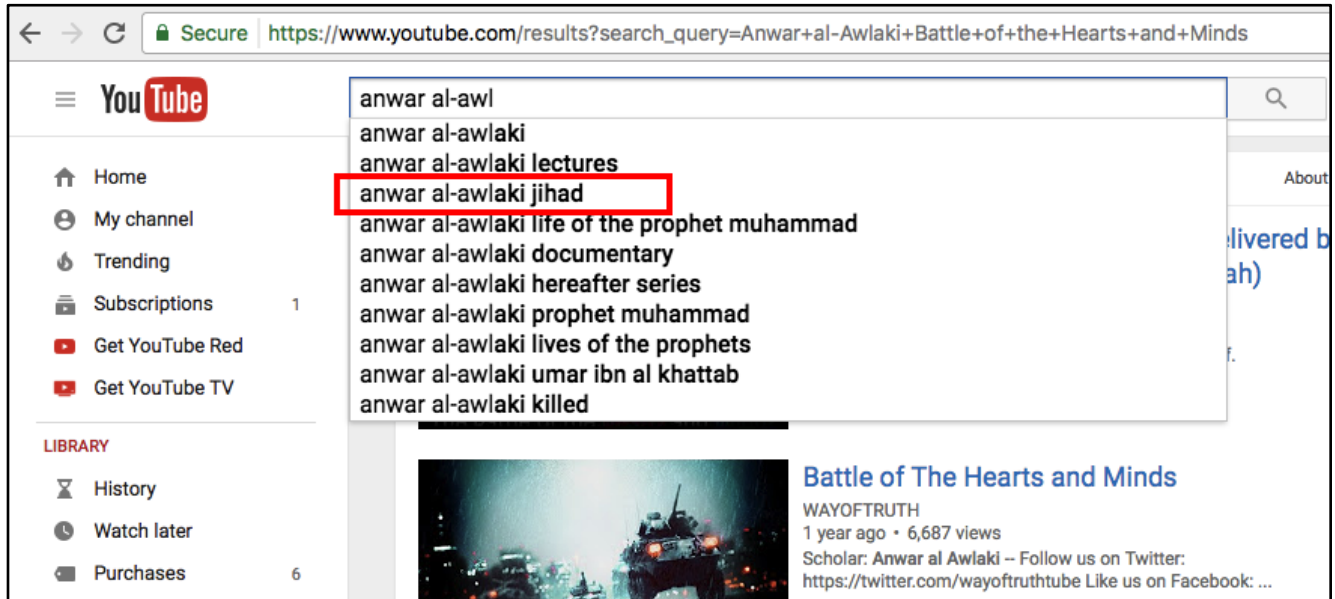
2) Autofill (a feature that suggests search terms as you type):

- a. YouTube’s autofill option urges users to search for “Anwar al-Awlaki” after typing just the first three letters of his name.



Search for “Anw” (including just the first three letters of his name) spurs YouTube’s autofill to suggest a search for “Anwar al-Awlaki,” nudging users toward Awlaki’s content. (August 2017)

- b. When typing “Anwar al-Awlaki,” one of the first autofill options to appear has historically been “Anwar al-Awlaki jihad”



June 2017.

CEP notes that as of June 2017, this algorithm no longer appeared to have been in place. However, with just one additional letter, j, users are encouraged to search for “Anwar al-Awlaki jihad”:



Features like the one described above have lured users toward extremist content by

- i. Normalizing a search for “Anwar al-Awlaki jihad” and by signaling to users that this search is common and/or typical
- ii. Promoting a specialized search for jihad-related content as opposed to just Awlaki-related content

c. YouTube’s autofill feature promotes Awlaki’s extremist-related content even to casual users.

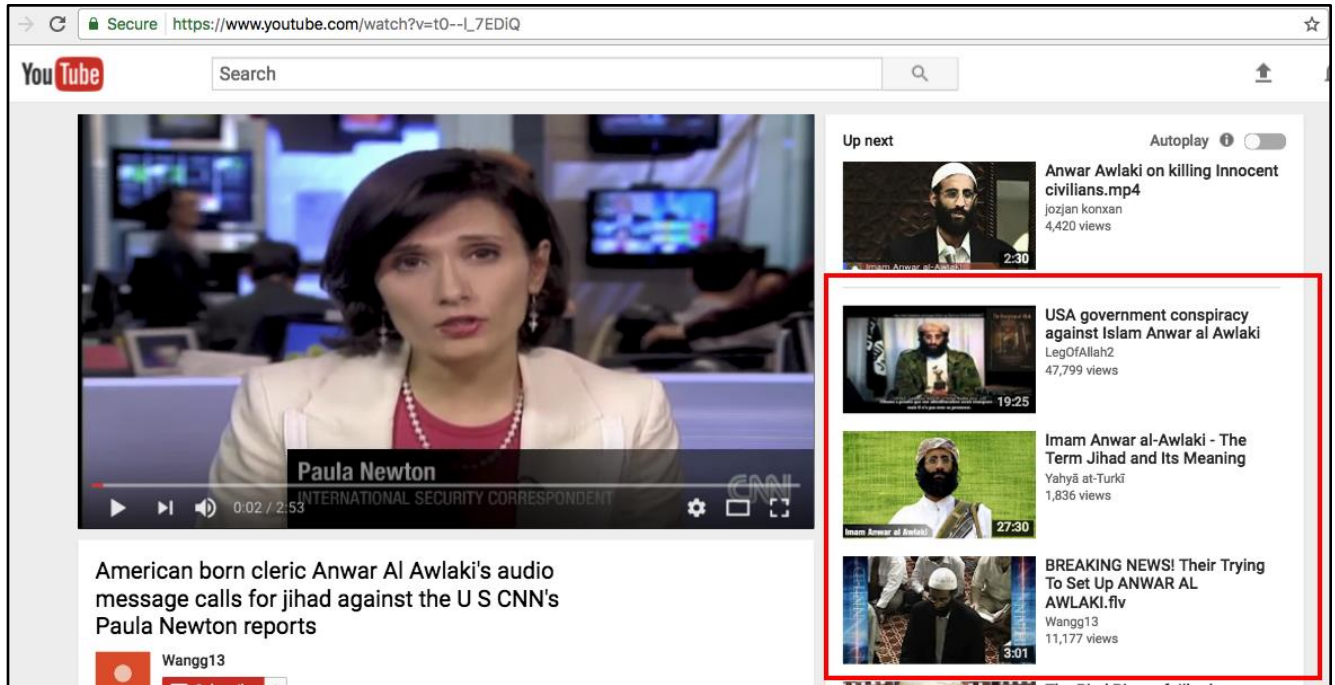
3) Recommendations (suggesting related content):

a. In the past, YouTube’s **autoplay** feature—which queues related videos to begin after one video has ended—has [lured users](#) from media reports on Anwar al-Awlaki to lectures by the extremist cleric

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- b. YouTube’s **sidebar** feature recommends videos on the right hand side of the screen under “autoplay.” As of June 2017, CEP has found that this feature continues to lure users toward (a) additional videos by Anwar al-Awlaki and (b) more explicitly extremist content by Anwar al-Awlaki
 - i. Even when clicking on a [video](#) as innocuous as CNN’s *reporting* on Awlaki, videos of Awlaki will link on the sidebar to lectures by Anwar al-Awlaki



*Anwar al-Awlaki material fills the **recommendations sidebar** for CNN Video (June 2017) Under YouTube’s **autoplay** feature, a lecture by Anwar al-Awlaki—“The Term Jihad and Its Meaning” —is queued to automatically begin after the CNN video ends. Pro-Awlaki lectures appear in YouTube’s recommendations section.*

Conclusion:

YouTube hosts an alarmingly large number of search results related to Anwar al-Awlaki, the late al-Qaeda leader who—as CEP has documented—served as a radicalizing influence in [dozens of terrorist cases](#) in the United States and Europe. Orlando gunman [Omar Mateen](#) and San Bernardino shooter [Syed Farook](#) are among the many believed to have been radicalized to terrorism in part through exposure to Awlaki’s lectures. Boston bombers [Dzokhar](#) and [Tamerlan Tsarnaev](#) are among those who were documented to have accessed these lectures through YouTube in particular.

Many of the videos available on YouTube are lectures by Awlaki himself, posted online by ostensible supporters of Awlaki, including his ideology, and his terrorist legacy. A significant and worrisome subset of these lectures employ language that explicitly or implicitly endorses violence against American and Western civilians. These videos and others—including Awlaki’s “Battle of the Hearts

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and Minds” lecture, his “Constants on the Paths of Jihad” lecture, and his “Never Trust a Kuffar [non-believer]” lecture—are not only hosted on YouTube, but are made particularly accessible and normalized through YouTube’s **search** engine process, its **autofill** feature, and its **recommendations** section.

CEP has repeatedly called on YouTube to **cease serving as a vehicle for terrorist recruitment by Awlaki**. This call includes the request to cease hosting all of Awlaki’s lectures, and to cease promoting Awlaki’s most extremist and inciting lectures through the company’s search, autofill, and recommendations algorithms. While CEP has seen some progress in the takedown of certain copies of Awlaki’s videos, other copies of the lecture remain readily accessible and live on the platform for months or years at a time. Confusing the matter, YouTube has added a warning label on at least one copy of Awlaki’s “Battle of the Hearts and Minds” lectures, while enabling users to still access the video and acknowledging that YouTube has reviewed the video and allowed it to remain up.

In November 2017, Google acceded to external pressure and pledged to drastically reduce Awlaki’s presence on its YouTube platform.² As of November 27, 2017, a YouTube search for “Anwar al-Awlaki” returned 9,800 results, which included news reports and other secondary references to Awlaki.

Until YouTube refuses to host Awlaki’s extremist content on its platform, individuals will continue to turn to YouTube for exposure to messaging by Awlaki and other influential and radicalizing preachers in order to self-radicalize to extremism. This radicalization process too often does not end online, but instead results in the deaths of those radicalized to violence, and their victims in Orlando, San Bernardino, Paris, and beyond.

² Scott Shane, “In ‘Watershed Moment,’ YouTube Blocks Extremist Cleric’s Message,” *New York Times*, November 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/12/us/politics/youtube-terrorism-anwar-al-awlaki.html>.